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Whither the C. I. A.?

The C. I. A. is losing Allen Dulles, in the words of one who has known his work long and well, "unapproachable for knowledge of the world and its leaders and the use of intelligence in relation to national security." And it is gaining as its new chief John A. McCone, a hard-hitting administrator and cold-war realist who has served with distinction as Undersecretary of the Air Force under Truman and chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission under Eisenhower. The C. I. A., in sum, has had the best and is getting the best.

But, to crib the late Charles E. Wilson, is what is good for the C. I. A. necessarily good for the U. S. A.? All unanswered, at a time of turnover when new policy could be laid down by a new Administration, is the future role and control of our gigantic intelligence outfit. And if the President does not redefine C. I. A. function, no one can.

For it is undoubtedly the largest autonomous arm of our Government. Its appropriations, like its employees, are largely hidden under other budget items; Congress has no sure way to review its performance. The press, and thus the public, are denied all access to our system of secret intelligence. Is there no feasible form of at least indirect control and review of its work?

In our dangerous era, as the Cuban and U-2 fiascos show, the C. I. A. can play a major part in our foreign policy or military situations. And is this a good thing? Should an agency beyond Cabinet or congressional control bear responsibility for creating or fulfilling major overseas commitments?

The President right now faces tough decisions on both the means and extent of our military support against the Communist guerrillas in South Viet Nam. Is the Pentagon or the C. I. A. to provide his determining advice? Is the Pentagon or the C. I. A. to equip or direct our counter action? To what extent, in fact, is the C. I. A. to continue its semi-military role?

And on the purely intelligence side, gathering information on military and political establishments, of both friend and foe, is not our far-flung network of C.I.A., Army, Navy, Air Force and State Department agents in great part redundant? Could not friction, as well as expense, be reduced by merging some or all of our intelligence services at the lower echelons?

The obstacle to such a reduction is bureaucratic, not technical. C. I. A. independence is not paralleled in other governments; here it began only with the Second World War, and to a greater extent is a product of the post-war period. Mr. McCone inherits a vast empire whose growth has been speeded not alone by the secrecy of its operations but the unarguability of its appropriations. That growth has not been contested and evaluated from the outside, step by step.

Mr. McCone, as his opening task, might attempt such an evaluation. He and the President to whom he reports, should try to answer the sort of questions we have raised, and many like them which the public in its ignorance can do no more than suggest.